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A

SECOND LETTER

TO

MR. SHERIDAN.

BY

A Suffolk Freeholder.

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BRITISH MUSEUM

A

SECOND LETTER

TO

Mr. Sheridan.

WITH

STRICTURES ON THE GENERAL CONDUCT

OF

Opposition.

BY A SUFFOLK FREEHOLDER.

Rev.d Chas. Edwd Stewart, Rector of Reed.

..... Ecce iterum! et est mihi sœpe vocandus
Ad partes.....

BURY ST. EDMUND'S:
PRINTED BY J. RACKHAM, STATIONER.
SOLD BY BROWN, ESSEX-STREET, STRAND, LONDON,
AND ALL OTHER BOOKSELLERS.

1796

TO

MR. SHERIDAN.

SIR,

IN a former letter I endeavoured to do justice to the separate merits of your conduct in the preceding * session of parliament; to your uniform opposition to every measure of government, that was calculated to secure the constitution, or promote the success of the war; to your accuracy of information and fidelity of statement, never contradicted but by the stubborn evidence of facts; to your consistency in reprobating measures at one period, which you supported at another; to your laudable efforts to stimulate the ardour of our officers, by depreciating the services of Lord

* The session of 1794.

 Hood;

Hood; to your anxious solicitude to guard the public purse from jobs and abuses of your own invention, and to your virtuous wish to suppress sinecure places, which very honourably commenced in an unfortunate disappointment of a vice-treasurership in Ireland.

Nor was I not attentive to your gallant declaration in the house, that there was no traitorous design formed against the constitution by any individuals, or by the political societies, and that all the plots and conspiracies, with which they had been cruelly and unjustly charged, originated solely in the foul imaginations and disordered conceptions of his majesty's ministers.

Such was the memorable declaration you made when I first wrote, and your exertions, to support the truth of it, have since been so eminently conspicuous, and added so much to the splendour of your character, that I cannot but address you a second time upon

upon the same subject, in order that the public may appreciate your services as they ought, and feel the same gratitude to you, as I do, for the benefits you are daily heaping upon the nation.

Amidst the variety of excellence which you are in the constant habit of displaying, it is extremely difficult to say what is best where all is almost equally good; but if I were compelled to give a preference, I should, with some hesitation perhaps, fix upon your conduct in the state trials. Upon other occasions you have manifested merely the virtues of the patriot, but on this you shone forth the meek, the exemplary Christian. You, who have been barbarously suspeted of envy, malevolence, and rancour, in your repeated attacks on the profligate Pitt, the pensioned Burke, and the apostate Windham, have proved, to the confusion of every calumniator, that you are a stranger to those vile passions, and as free from

from their influence, as Erskine is from vanity, or Lansdowne from duplicity.—You, of whom it has been said that you never forgave an injury, nor forgot an insult, have in this instance shown, that your bosom overflows with the milk of human kindness, and if you have a fault, it is, that you are of a temper too placable, of a disposition prone to forgiveness even to a degree of culpable weakness.

Mr. Fox distinguished himself in a similar manner; but his forbearance created no surprise, for he seldom forms a very intimate connexion without previously fighting his friend, or giving and receiving a proper portion of abuse. Of the first, Mr. Adam is an instance; of the second, the late Earl of Guildford, and the prattling, pedling haberdasher of sedition, the present member for Camelford, are striking examples.

"Can none remember? yes, I know all must,"

that at the contested election for Westminster,

minster, between Lord Hood and Lord John Townshend, Mr. Horne Tooke wrote a letter to * "Mr. Fox, not the man, but the butcher of the people," in which, amongst other compliments, he says— "Every honest man in the country will feel a decided detestation of your conduct, which, for twenty long years, has always appeared to me invariably the same, totally devoid of all public principle, dead to all sense of national honour, and incapable of shame." In a letter to Lord John Townshend, he styles Mr. Fox "the author of all mischief, and the seducer of some of the best men and best families in this country;" and directly charges you, "a senator and a magistrate," with assaulting and collaring a magistrate (the late Sir Sampson Wright) in the execution of his office, when he was

* The expressions "thus dotted" are not mine, but Mr. H. Tooke's, in his letters dated the 25th of July and 8th of August, 1788.

en-

endeavouring to quell a riot, in which Lord Clanwilliams' eldest son, Colonel Manners, Mr. Gilbert, Mr. Macnamara, and a long list of other voters in the interest of Lord Hood, were bludgeoned and wounded by "the bullies, bravoes, and hired ruffians of Mr. Fox."

At this time Mr. Horne Tooke seemed to think that your activity as a "magistrate and a senator," in breaking, rather than keeping, the peace, and in violating, instead of supporting, the freedom of election, was extremely reprehensible; but it ought to be remembered, that the wounded freeholders were friends of a minister whom you justly detest, and the assaulted magistrate was only one of the Westminster justices, all of whom are the constant objects of your venom and wit.

This circumstance, however, had no weight with Mr. Tooke, and he expressed his abhorrence of you and Mr. Fox in the strong

strong and unqualified language which I have stated. Nor did his enmity terminate here, for in 1790 he opposed Mr. Fox for Westminster. You of course supported Mr. Fox, and, appearing upon the hustings one day without him, played off all your small shot of quips, cranks, and sarcasms, upon his distanced opponent, and held him up with great success to the ridicule and derision of his constituents. Mr. Tooke was not slow in returning the civility, and made an unlucky comparison of Mr. Fox to a Mountebank, and you to a Merry Andrew, who, in the absence of your principal, were employed to come forward, and entertain the populace with jokes, tricks, and other divertisements, till the arrival of the doctor. The laugh, I am told, turned against you; you made a hasty retreat, and went, it is said, for the doctor to renew the engagement, in which you had been so completely defeated.

After this keen encounter of your wits, an unfortunate dissension subsisted, till the French revolution, which erected in France the * noblest and most durable fabric, ever raised on the foundation of human integrity, produced the happiest consequences in this country, and sealed the bond of union between Mr. Fox, Mr. Tooke, and you.—When Mr. Tooke was upon his trial for high treason, Mr. Fox appeared in his behalf; and you, Mr. Sheridan, greatly forgetting the "senator, the magsitrate, and the merry Andrew," bore willing witness to the purity of his intentions, and the geral similarity of his sentiments to your own on the subject of reform. Indeed, you adduced an instance to prove that he was of the two the most rational and temperate, for he did not wear, and objected to your wearing, a national cockade at an anniver-

* It led to the murder of the king, and lasted, I believe, above a year.

sary

sary dinner at the Crown and Anchor, to celebrate the French Revolution, and amended a motion of yours for an unqualified approbation of it, by a declaration of attachment to the principles of our own constitution.

I cannot help thinking that this lowering yourself, to elevate your new friend, was a little ex abundanti, and a pious, rather than a judicious, fraud of friendship; it had, however, an excellent effect, and was ably seconded by the testimony of a member of the Constitutional Society, who swore that Mr. Tooke, so far from taking an active part in the cause of reform, or entering into a conspiracy against the state, lived in retirement, and anxiously wished that a law might be passed to confine him within the narrow precincts of his house and garden.

When I read this evidence, I could hardly bring myself to believe that this

man of moderation, this sequestered hermit, was the Mr. Tooke, whose whole life has been spent in the duties of active citizenship; who, thirty years ago, was at first the friend, then the deserter, of Wilkes, and was dignified with the titles of the Mile-end orator, a factious demagogue, a leading incendiary, an atheist parson. Nor were these his only distinctions; his master of arts degree was stopped at Cambridge, because he wrote a blasphemous letter to Wilkes, to convince him that he was ordained an atheist, and not a hypocrite. He was convicted at Guildford assizes of grossly defaming Lord Onslow, and damages of four hundred pounds given against him. He was found guilty in the Court of King's Bench of an atrocious libel upon the English army, in charging them with barbarously murdering the Americans at Lexington and Concord; and the then Attorney General (Thurlow) when he moved the Court

Court for judgment, said, the crime Mr. Tooke had committed, was, in his mind, so little removed from high treason, that he could not perceive the line of distinction; he, therefore, strongly pressed the punishment of the pillory, because it would have a powerful effect upon the mob, and leave, he hoped, a lasting impression on the memory of the scribbler. The Attorney General did not succeed in his application, and Mr. Tooke was only sentenced to pay a fine of two hundred pounds, to be imprisoned twelve months, and find security for his good behaviour for three years.

With the powerful recommendation of a jail, and of two verdicts, recording him a private and public libeller, he offered himself a candidate for Westminster, and, having lost his election, petitioned parliament against the high bailiff's return. The petition was reprobated by both sides of the house; I do not mean by you, Mr. Sheridan

dan (indeed, you have lately spoke of it in high terms of approbation) but by Mr. Burke, Mr. Fox, and General Burgoyne, as well as by Mr. Pitt, the Master of the Rolls, and Mr. Bearcroft. The Speaker declared it to be a most impudent, indecent, unprecedented attack on the character and dignity of the house; an outrageous violation of the respect due to it, and tending to throw upon it the most shameful and unjustifiable insult and contempt. The committee, who tried the merits of the petition, determined it to be frivolous and vexatious, and Mr. Tooke was compelled by law to pay all costs.

Unable to serve his country in parliament, he determined to reign* in the patriotic societies: these he modelled and governed at his pleasure; planned and corrected their proceedings; frequently signed the name of Hardy, to resolutions of which

* Better to reign in hell, then serve in heaven.

the

the shoemaker was perfectly ignorant; framed addresses to the jacobin club and French convention; and raised subscriptions for the armies of France. By his direction the thanks of these societies were voted to Paine, Frost, and Barlow; to the first, for his Rights of Man, every page of which was intended to vilify and degrade the constitution, and to excite the people to rebellion; to the two latter, for promising the French convention, after they had deposed Louis XVI, the establishment of a similar convention in England. Under his auspices too, Roland, Barrere, and Saint André were elected honorary members, because they had denied the inviolability of the king, and opened the way to his destruction.

Having, however, learned prudence in the jail, which he had no desire to revisit, Mr. Tooke occasionally declared to his friends (that they might remember it at a

proper

proper time) that he was sincerely attached to the constitution, and wished only for a temperate reform in the commons house of parliament; while at the clubs, he held far different language, supported the necessity of universal suffrage and annual elections, and deluded his hearers to acts, in which he meant not to participate. For as soon as they were sufficiently inflamed to vote any resolves, seditious or treasonable, he made it a practice to quit the chair, and withdrew from the danger and consequences to which he left them exposed. By this masterly manœuvre, which some weak people called a dastardly, deep concerted fraud (though some of his foolish followers might have been consigned to the gallows) Mr. Tooke secured to himself a certain, if not a very honourable, escape.

This plain and simple narrative of the life and conversation of Mr. Tooke, I am afraid, you will think rather too long; but

as

as the various virtues detailed in it have made him your friend, I hope you will pardon me this wrong, and I will instantly hasten to the trials of him and his associates, Hardy the shoemaker, and Thelwall the lecturer.

Nothing, I am confident, has inspired the friends of liberty and equality with such well-grounded confidence; nothing has struck so much terror and dismay into the advocates of despotism and limited monarchy (which are synonimous terms) as the magnanimous disregard of rank, situation, and decency, displayed by you and your colleagues on this illustrious occasion. It was an act of heroism, hitherto unparalleled in the history of this country, and which, I trust and believe, no future opposition will ever be found to equal. Far be it from me to say that it was a degradation of their character; I should as soon think of calling it an insult to the administration

stration of justice,—an encouragement to sedition and treason.

When both houses of parliament, after a minute and anxious investigation, had reported that certain societies were combined for the purpose of subverting the constitution, and had published, from their secret papers and correspondence, such a mass of treason, as left no doubt of their criminal intentions; when a most respectable grand jury had, upon these documents, put your friend and his accomplices upon their trials for high treason, the leaders of opposition came down in a body, to support the ringleaders of these societies, and to stand between the conspirators and the punishment due to their crimes. They came down in a body, proudly to evince the most perfect contempt of the proceedings of the houses to which they respectively belonged, and unequivocally to swear that the prisoners at the bar were firmly attached

tached to the constitution, and had no object in view but a reform of the house of commons, by the legal mode of petition, and by no other.

It seems difficult to conceive why the Earl of Lauderdale and Mr. Fox were called, unless it was to do honour to the good old cause of reform; for the noble Earl spoke principally to the acts of the Scotch convention, and Mr. Fox had a most imperfect recollection of once seeing his, and your friend Mr. Tooke, at a public meeting in 1785.

Mr. Francis, from a five minutes conversation on a set subject, swore to the general character and pure intentions of the shoemaker, but declined to state a material fact for Mr. Tooke, which Mr. Erskine assured the jury, he (Mr. Francis) was ready to prove.

Earl Stanhope deposed, that Mr. Tooke, in 1780, 1781, and 1785, was ready to go

with the reformers of those days, as far, at least, as they intended, but knew nothing of his plans subsequent to the latter period.

When it was your turn to be called, you took a much larger field, and entered upon the vindication of Hardy in a very superior style of exertion. It appeared, that in March, 1793, you requested an interview with him, and solicited his assistance in an inquiry which you had undertaken to institute; that you kindly put him upon his guard, and then asked him what object he had in view, and what mode he meant to pursue for attaining it. Flattered by your attentions, and charmed by your condescension, the honest shoemaker availed himself of so favourable an opportunity, and, with much earnestness, assured you that his whole object was to obtain a parliamentary reform by peaceable means.

There can be no doubt of the truth of this answer; but, whether true or false, it

seems

seems to be the only one that Hardy could give with safety, or in common prudence: for had he, in the language of the society (whose letters he wrote, and whose resolutions he signed) told you that it was his and their intention to crush the viper Aristocracy, and to rip up monarchy by the roots; your fond affection for those unnecessary branches of our despicable constition would have taken alarm, and prompted you instantly to disclose the danger to government. Hardy knew better than to insult or trifle with your loyalty, but, at your request, furnished you with a list of the houses where the societies held their meetings, and offered to shew you their books, papers, and correspondence, that you might communicate them to parliament.

Anxious as you were to prove the non-existence of seditious practices, and to vindicate the societies, it is a litte extraordinary

dinary that you should not accept this offer, nor examine the documents, which would unquestionably have rescued them from the cruel aspersions of their inveterate enemies. It could not be understood between Mr. Hardy and you, that he was to make a proper declaration for you to remember; to furnish you with a list of the places, where seditious practices were supposed to be carried on, to be lost when you were desired to produce it; and to offer you the inspection of books which you promised not to examine. Certain it is, however, that the list was lost, and the books were not examined, but the declaration was luckily remembered.

In defence of Mr. Tooke, your testimony was the zeal of patriotism, the ardour of friendship, and you recollected, in his favour, a vast variety of circumstances that happened fourteen years ago, with as much accuracy and precision, as if they had taken

place

place the day before. You said that Mr. Tooke and you (though not upon terms of friendship in the year 1780) were delegates to promote a parliamentary reform, by the best and strongest legal means; you were to collect the sense of the people on the subject; you were not to use force (heaven forbid) but *to create in parliament a degree of awe—not a wrong awe—but that sort of awe,* which was due to the sentiments of the people, publicly expressed.

From this beating about the bush, by this kind of a sort of an awe, I suppose, I am to understand, that it was the plan of you and the delegates in 1780 to awe, not to over-awe, parliament; a distinction without a difference, and the design and the doctrine are equally constitutional. That a degree, and a very great degree, of respect is due from parliament to the sentiments of the people, fairly collected, and temperately expressed, I most readily allow; but the cla-

clamours of clubs, of delegates from those clubs, and of missionaries from packed and partial meetings, parliament ought to treat with the most perfect contempt. The nation at large does not condescend to appoint such delegates, nor even to notice their proceedings; and this indifference, these ingenious gentlemen affect to construe into approbation of them and their measures. In the language of Mr. Burke,* the vanity, restlessness, petulance, and spirit of intrigue of these petty cabals, who attempt to hide their total want of consequence in bustle and noise, and puffing, and mutual quotation of each other, make them imagine that our contemptuous neglect of their abilities is a mark of general acquiescence in their opinions—no such thing. Because half a dozen grasshoppers, under a fern, make the field ring with their importunate chink, whilst thousands of great cattle, re-

* See Mr. Burke's Reflections.

posed

posed beneath the shadow of the British oak, chew the cud and are silent; pray do not imagine, that those who make the noise are the only inhabitants of the field; that, of course, they are many in number, or that, after all, they are other than the little, shrivelled, meagre, hopping, though loud and troublesome, insects of the hour.

But to return to your evidence in favour of your brother delegate, which you concluded by stating (as I mentioned before) his objections to your cockade, and his amendment to your motion, and by repeating the very words of a speech which he made four years and a half before, expressive of his attachment to the constitution.

Such was the testimony given by you and your party in behalf of the conspirators, and it was intended to shew (particularly yours) that the object of the Corresponding and Constitutional Societies, in 1794, was the same as you were delegated to attain in

1780,

1780, and that Messrs. Tooke and Co. were disposed to go no greater lengths at this time, than you were at the former period; in short, you made a common cause with them, and, to serve them, generously took to yourself a degree of guilt—not positive guilt—but that sort of guilt, which is sometimes imputed, by ignorant people, to reformers, whose plans and principles are not perfectly understood, and who mean to awe, not to over-awe, parliament.

Your opinion, indeed, that the societies and their leaders intended nothing more than a reform in parliament by peaceable means, was founded upon the best of all possible proofs, the private declarations of Hardy, and the public professions of Tooke; to these you gave implicit credit, and confirmed your belief of them with the solemnity of an oath. Many, however, who were not so fortunate as to enjoy the confidence, or to hear the unpremeditated effusions of

these

these persecuted patriots, have taken the liberty to entertain sentiments diametrically opposite to yours, and formed them upon the ridiculous reports of the select committees, which have no better foundation than the positive acts, resolutions, and secret correspondence of the different societies. These, of course, you had no opportunity of examining, or, if you had, you declined it, out of compliment, I suppose, to Hardy, whose offer of them you had rejected before, or because you had made up your mind on the subject, upon less suspicious and more satisfactory evidence.

From these papers, to be sure, it does appear that the societies, whose only object was a reform in the house of commons by peaceable means, reprobated the aristocracy as the bane of this kingdom, and voted their thanks to Barlow for recommending, in the most unequivocal terms, the abolition of

royalty; that they circulated Paine's Rights of Man to poison the public mind, and to render every part of the constitution odious to the people, and raised a subscription to enable him to brave the insulted laws of their country; that they corresponded with the jacobin clubs, and elected French regicides honorary members of their own; that in an address to the convention they avowed the cause of France and theirs to be the same; and proposed a triple alliance, not of the crown, but of the people of America, France and England.

The means, too, which they meant to pursue, were equally peaceable and constitutional. They declared *that they would petition parliament no more; that more effectual means than petitions must be adopted, as soon as the great body of the people shall be courageous and virtuous enough to join them in the attempt; that they cannot expect to re-possess their rights without a struggle;*

that

that they should shew themselves an indignant, oppressed people, in whom is not yet entirely extinct the valour of their forefathers, and must have redress from their own laws, and not from the laws of their plunderers, enemies, and oppressors.

Mr. Erskine, though his vanity was gratified by the splendid appearance of you and your * party, had too much good sense to lay any unnecessary stress upon your generous and manly declarations, and rested the defence of his clients upon far different grounds. He well knew that these invitations to rebellion, this plan to save parliament the trouble of making laws, must be completely done away, and therefore endeavoured to get rid of them by shewing,

* Since this letter was sent to the press, another patriot has been tried for high treason, protected and saved by Messrs. Sheridan and Co. who knew his designs, and forgot to communicate them to ministry.

that Hardy was a foolish, ignorant fellow, an instrument in the hands of more designing men; that Tooke was not present when treasonable resolutions, signed with his name, were voted; and that Thelwall boasted of crimes which he never committed. This scheme he pursued with infinite success, and, by proving Hardy a mere machine and a tool, Tooke a consummate knave, and Thelwall a vaporing braggart, induced the good-natured, sensible juries to spare their valuable lives, and restore them to the arms of opposition and the societies.

Such was the happy event of the state trials; and though the virtuous interference of the lords and gentlemen in opposition did not alone produce it, yet the conspirators were encouraged, and the societies convinced that they might undertake any act of patriotism, and be secure of support and protection.

Soon

Soon after the suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act was taken off (which you said in the house you never expected to see) the societies pursued their old measures with additional spirit, and, on the Monday before the meeting of parliament, assembled their forces, to the number of some thirty thousand good and true men, in the fields behind Copenhagen House.—Nothing passed on this day, except the usual freedom of speech; an intimation that our * gracious king was to go to the house of lords on the following Thursday, and an earnest desire that the company present would attend and give him a warm reception. The desire was complied with, and the life of the king twice attempted, first in his way to the house of lords, and again on his return from St. James's to Buckingham House.

* Sir Francis Bassett stated this in his place.

From

From an idle apprehension of danger from meetings, thus respectably attended, thus properly instructed; and in consequence of this laughable attack, which the Marquis of Lansdowne declared was contrived by Mr. Pitt, and you asserted was made by a spy in his pay, ministry had the audacity to propose two bills to parliament, one for the better security of his majesty's person, the other to prevent seditious meetings. The pretended object of the bills was to protect the king from assassination, and the constitution from destruction; but the real design was to multiply treasons unnecessarily, and to repeal the bill of rights. This the glorious minority in both houses saw in an instant, and satisfied that the person of the king was as safe as they wished it to be, and the intentions of the societies as pure as their own, resisted the bills and defended the meetings.

In

In the upper house the proud, ponderous, and portly Duke of Bedford took the lead, and opposed them with very great perseverance and with very little effect. In the course of what the courtesy of his friends called argument, he modestly ascribed the purest motives to himself, candidly imputed the worst to ministry, and most gallantly insulted the * Bishop of Rochester. That learned prelate (after the Hotspur of the North had declared his intention of obeying the laws no longer than he thought it prudent, and recommended to his audience to do the same) ventured to say that the mass of the people had nothing to do with the laws, but to obey them; that they had an undoubted right to petition against the pass-

* I have frequently observed that an attack upon a bishop is the first proof that many temporal peers have given of their courage; indeed, to do them justice, it may be said it is the only one that some of the brightest luminaries amongst them have condescended to afford.

ing

ing, or for the repeal, of a law; but if their petitions were not attended with success, obedience then became a positive duty.—For this opinion the young and valiant Duke of Bedford, without the least regard to the age, the rank, or the profession of the speaker, or rather, I believe, from a proper consideration of all * three, fearlessly attacked him, and, with a happy mixture of aristocratic insolence and sans culotte vulgarity, told an old man, a peer, and a bishop, that his doctrine deserved the vile punishment of the pillory. After this display of eloquence and courage, which did equal honour to his head and heart, he began to prattle about the virtues of his ancestors, talked of his readiness to emulate their example, and promised to expose himself (God save the mark!) whenever his services were called for by the country.

* Perhaps more properly from a consideration of two of the three, the age and profession.

The

The merits of the Russel family, in the times of the Stuarts, I do not mean to discuss, neither of the father who went over to William, nor of the son who lost his head on a scaffold. I always thought, indeed, that he died innocent of the crimes of which he was accused; but Mr. Fox denies the fact, and lately declared in the house of commons, that he admired the character of Lord Russel, not for his virtuous innocence, but for his meritorious guilt, in conspiring to seduce the guards, to depose his sovereign, and to bring about a revolution.

Leaving then Mr. Fox to admire such excellence as this, and to congratulate the present duke on possessing the spirit, the patriotism, the fortitude, and perseverance of his ancestor—it must, I think, be allowed that in these our days (whatever may have been the case in former times) the illustrious house of Russel has no particular claim upon the esteem and gratitude of the

English nation. Of the last Duke of Bedford's merits it has never been my lot to hear; if he did good, it was by stealth; but his demerits, not few in number, are upon record, and shew the inefficacy of riches and rank, without virtue, to render their owner respectable. Possessed of immense property, he laboured incessantly to add to the heap; of the highest order of nobility, he stooped to any means to obtain power that he might play the tyrant; but he lost by tyranny what he gained by servility, and experienced the most mortifying insults and defeats from the most contemptible opponents. In Exeter cathedral he was with difficulty rescued from the fury of a mob; on Litchfield race-ground he was publicly horse-whipped by a little country attorney, and driven, with all his interest, from his favourite borough of Bedford, by—Parson Horne.—But under these ridiculous distresses, had the good duke no consolations, nothing to heal the wounds

wounds of injured honour and disappointed ambition? He had. Amidst the hisses of the people, he could contemplate in his coffers the hoards which seemed to swell under his touch; he was at the head of a party, for its disinterestedness, moderation, and honesty, distinguished by the flattering title of the Bloomsbury gang: he was lord-lieutenant of Ireland, which, JUNIUS says, he plundered and oppressed: he was sent ambassador to Paris, and concluded a peace, on the Marquis of Lansdowne's plan of reciprocity, by which the advantages were all on one side; France recovered almost the whole of her losses, and England (except in the person of her negociator) gained nothing in return.

Such was the late Duke of Bedford; and, gifted as the present is, there can be no reason to despair of his reaching, in due time, the excellence of his predecessor.—He has indeed began his career under circum-

cumstances singularly auspicious; for, since the Duke of Portland, and the Earls Spencer and Fitzwilliam, found themselves obliged to abandon Mr. Fox, and to leave him in the possession of the worst man in the kingdom, he has put himself at the head of a party, the odds and ends of every party, which, if not so numerous, is certainly more popular than even the Bloomsbury gang of his venerable grandsire. Nor has he shewn himself unworthy to be their leader; for, having failed with the whole of his forces, the * seven sages or champions (call them which you will) of England, to persuade his brother peers, he sallied forth from the house, armed with every thing but candour and fair dealing, to enlighten his fellow-citizens. For this one of his agents was employed in the circulation of hand-bills, to misrepresent the

* Bedford, Lauderdale, Abingdon, Chedworth, Derby, Besborough, St. John.

object

object and provisions of the treason and sedition bills, and detected in the commission of this act of ducal patriotism. For this, too, we saw his grace an itinerant orator, posting (like Major Sturgeon) from Ealing to Acton, from Acton to Uxbridge, from Hackney to Bedford; and, exalted upon a stage, we heard him, the *fidus Achates* of Mr. Fox, inflaming the populace in a style far above Hodgson's, not inferior to Jones's, and only not equal to the six-penny eloquence of Thelwall.

After the ostensible leader of opposition in the house of lords had thus distinguished himself, it was to be expected that the real leader and you, Mr. Sheridan, would combat the bills with equal candour and greater violence. Nor was the expectation disappointed. Mr. Fox declared that the bills inflicted a barbarous punishment on a trifling misdemeanor, arbitrarily accumulated treasons to harrass and oppress the subject, repealed

pealed the bill of rights, subverted the constitution, and reduced Englishmen to slaves. He threatened to withdraw from the public service, if the majority of the country were tame and dastardly enough to approve them; but if they had the spirit to disapprove them, and asked his opinion how they were to be resisted, he would tell them,—*In the first instance, by peaceable means; but if they passed into laws, that resistance then became a question, not of morality, but of prudence; and they must submit as long as they could not resist, but not a moment longer.* You, of course, acceded to all that Mr. Fox advanced, and fairly gave the reason why the people had a right to expect your assistance as well as opinion. *If* (you said) *they were to ask me how they were to act, if these bills pass by corrupt majorities, I should tell them, they ought to resist whenever they could prudently do it. As men of spirit, could we act otherwise? The*

people

people would say, You, by your language in the House, have inflamed us, and now you do not dare to pursue the measures you there maintained.

Every man of common candour must allow that this language is clear and explicit, and the invitation to rebellion open and undisguised. It has, too, the merit of novelty, and Mr. Fox and you may claim the proud distinction of having first, in your places, directed and commanded the people to pay no regard to parliament, but to take the redress of their grievances into their own hands. Mr. Fox also averred, that the opinion of the country appeared more clear, more decided, more unanimous against these bills, than on any other measure he ever witnessed in the course of his political life, and, instead of recommending to this vast majority the safe and legal means of petitioning, advised an instant appeal to the sword.

Has

Has Mr. Fox then forgot the detestation with which his coalition with Lord * North was regarded? Is the universal odium of his India bill entirely faded from his memory? Has he no recollection of the petitions, which poured in against his measures from every part of the kingdom, and drove him from the power which he has never been able to regain. There was a time when Mr. † Fox knew of no people of England, nor could hear their voice, in any other place than within the walls of parliament.

* This amiable and upright minister was reviled by Mr. Fox in the grossest terms during the whole of the American war, and was afterwards courted and persuaded to form a coalition with him. This step proved fatal to his interest, and fixed a stain (I hope the only one) on the consistency and goodness of his character.

† I once intended to give a history of Mr. Fox's inconsistencies, but not having time to write a folio, I was obliged to relinquish the tedious and disgusting task.

ment. There was a time when the house of commons, under the auspices of Mr. Fox, were to control the king in the appointment of his ministers, to make him a cypher on his throne, and to render the crown a bauble unfit for a man of spirit to wear. But those Halcyon days are over; and now, if the house of commons dare to oppose the dictates of Mr. Fox and the clamours of what he chooses to call a majority, their authority is to be resisted by force, and the five hundred and fifty-eight gentlemen in St. Stephen's chapel are to be sent about their business.

But, after all, where is this vast majority to be found? With every effort of oratory, influence, and misrepresentation, rather more towns and somewhat fewer counties, I believe, have petitioned against the bills than for them. The great body of the nation have not interfered; they by their silence seem to acquiesce in the necessity of

the measures, and consent to the temporary abridgment of one part of their liberties, that the whole may be preserved from destruction. If, then, Mr. Fox has not changed his intention, the time appears to be arrived when he may retire from the service of an ungrateful nation; and if he does, let him take with him the conviction, that the people of England have too much loyalty to accept his desperate invitation to rebellion, and too much spirit to suffer him to be the dictator of his country.

Not satisfied with going the same and even greater lengths than Mr. Fox, you, Mr. Sheridan,

Nil actum reputans, si quid superesset agendum,

undertook the easy and honourable task of vindicating the societies, whose machinations one of the bills was intended to counteract and defeat. This was natural enough, for as you had sworn to the innocence of the leaders, it was impossible you could sup-

suppose the herd, who were led by them, to be guilty. After affirming that there was not the least connexion between the proceedings of the societies and the attack upon the king, you attributed it to the pressure of distress, and pointedly asked, *Why men, returning home to their starving families, might not, from the extreme irritation of the moment, and the delusion of confounding the acts of the minister with the authority of the monarch, be guilty of such an accidental outrage?* You wound up the whole of your argument with a solemn declaration, that *every thing was conducted with the greatest propriety, and instead of sedition, a spirit of loyalty was displayed throughout the whole of the meeting at Copenhagen House.*

Truth, sir, is said to be *simplex duntaxat et unum*, and its opposite is distinguished by a pleasing and fanciful variety. You first asserted in the house, that the attack on the king

king was concerted by ministers to answer their own base purposes, but have since discovered it was *accidentally* made by some industrious citizens, who were returning from hard and ill paid labour, to their families, whom they were unable to support. This is not only an ingenious mode of accounting for the outrage, but a very kind palliation of its atrociousness; for the poor men were driven to it by distress, which, most probably, was occasioned by the king, and inflamed to it by delusions, in which the societies certainly had no share. They (I have your authority for saying so) are animated by a spirit of the purest loyalty, and entertain the same regard for every part of the constitution. The extracts, which I have selected from their papers, previous to the state trials, in some measure establish this fact, and their publications since that period put it beyond the possibility of a doubt. Two of their

their pamphlets were quoted by the Attorney General; one "A Summary of the Duties of Citizenship," which is said to be printed expressly for the edification and instruction of mankind, and does nothing worse than ridicule the scriptures, and affirm, that the books of Moses and Christ were not written by the authors, whose names they bear, but were fabricated by the propagators and supporters of despotism. The other, "The Rights of Kings" (written by Citizen Lee, printer to the * Corresponding Society, at the sign of the British Tree of Liberty) states "*That the curse of "the Almighty to man is kingly govern-"ment; wherever this is established, the "country grows pale, the inhabitants are*

* Mr. Sheridan proved, to his own satisfaction, that Citizen Lee claimed an honour to which he was not entitled; he was only a member of the Corresponding Society, and printer, not to them, but to Orator Thelwall.

"*ener-*

" *enervated, and the lower orders sacrificed* " *to monarchy. See England!*" Some expressions against the king were so gross, so base and scandalous, that the Attorney declared he could not mention them.

Lord Mornington read from a pamphlet (published by a bookseller at whose house a petition of the societies was left for signatures) an extract, which proposed to the poor *to seize the landed property of the rich; to compel them to disgorge the last payment of their tenants, in order to form a fund for good citizens; and if the aristocracy rose in resistance, to dispatch and cut them off root and branch.* His lordship also mentioned a pamphlet, printed by Citizen Lee, in which regicide by the guillotine is recommended, and Ankerstroem and Damien are held up to the reverence of mankind.

Even at the meeting at Copenhagen House, where all was the strictest propriety and the purest loyalty, his lordship,

on

on his own authority, stated unequivocally, that a production, entitled "King-killing no Murder," and another, "The Reign of George the Last," were distributed and sold. There, too, the present scarcity was attributed, not to the failure of crops, but to the war and the minister; and there the rabble were invited to trample upon the authority of parliament, and to give the king a warm reception.

Three days after this the king was attacked, and ministers, upon no better grounds than that accidental outrage, and a misrepresentation of the proper and loyal proceedings of the societies, adopted measures, which, you gravely tell us, tend to introduce despotism, and establish tyranny on the * ruins of the little, very little freedom which now remains in the country.

* Poor Old England! it seems it is all over with her, and we have been only not slaves, for a long time past, without knowing it.

For

For this detestable purpose they brought in a bill, which enacts that no meeting of more than fifty persons shall be holden for or on pretext of preparing petitions for an alteration of matters established in church or state, unless a previous notice of five days, signed by seven householders, be given to the clerk of the peace, or in a newspaper. If in meetings thus called it be proposed to alter any thing, by law established, by other means than by the authority of king, lords, and commons, a magistrate is empowered to disperse the meeting, and to take the proposing orator into custody. Six-penny political lecturers are obliged to take out a shilling licence, under the penalty of an hundred pounds, and a magistrate is authorized to attend the lectures. County meetings, meetings of corporate bodies, and all meetings called by justices, remain with their usual privileges, unaltered, and untouched by this all-sweeping bill.

Not

Not content with this daring encroachment on the general right of petitioning, and finding by long experience that repeated imprisonment had no effect in stopping the torrent of sedition, ministers by another bill inflicted the punishment of transportation upon a citizen convicted, only twice, of an offence so trivial, as vilifying and degrading the constitution, and maliciously endeavouring to destroy the reverence of the people for their government. —To protect the king from a second accidental attack, they made a conspiracy to levy war, to do any thing that may tend to the king's death, to maim or to do him any bodily harm, to restrain and imprison his person, or to seek to make him alter by force the measures of his government, direct and substantive treason.

These are the bills which not only completely gag the good people of England, and harrass them with an accumulation of

new and undefined treasons, but may probably prevent a repetition of the glorious scenes, to which we were witnesses in 1780. At that period large and tumultuous meetings were called together, under the plausible pretence of petitioning parliament, and immediately proceeded to a radical reform of every grievance. Private property, to an immense amount, was plundered or burnt, and the Bank, the fatal source of valueless assignats and fictitious credit, gallantly, but unsuccessfully, attacked: the persons of ministers and magistrates were assaulted and endangered, and their houses stormed and pillaged; prisons and dungeons, worse even than the Bastille, were demolished, and the wretched victims of cruelty and despotism restored to light and liberty, prepared to break their chains upon the heads of their oppressors.

These promising beginnings had, however, a fatal conclusion, and many hundreds

of

of brave, but unfortunate, reformers perished by the sword, or were sacrificed to the unrelenting rigour of sanguinary laws.

Meetings, of the same description, began of late to assemble again, and the metropolis was kept in a constant state of agitation and alarm. Similar causes would have produced similar effects, and as punishment, not prevention, ought to be the object of a wise and merciful legislator, the minister deserves impeachment for his head-long haste, in proposing measures to save the country from probable confusion, and the guilty and deluded from certain destruction.

But, Mr. Sheridan, do you really suppose that we are to be duped into a belief that these bills are what you, and the Whig Club,* and the Corresponding Society state them

* The remnant of this club are aping the Jacobin Club, and setting up their speculations against the acts

them to be, subversive of our ancient and undoubted liberties! We are sensible that they are an extension of the laws of treason, and a restraint upon the freedom of debate and the right of petition; but we feel that strong necessity, and the safety

acts of the legislature. They have lately published a thing, under the title of a Declaration, and called upon the people at large to subscribe it. All proper means have been employed to procure signatures. In the upper house at the London Tavern, the Duke of Bedford, and in the lower house at the Crown and Anchor, that pert, prim prater of the Northern race, the eternal egotist, after drinking their own healths, and brother Billy's, and brother Harry's, and Jones's, and Lord Lauderdale's, and Thelwall's, and Sheridan's, recommended it amidst the orgies of Mr. Fox's birth-day, and met with wonderful success. The Duke and Mr. Erskine spoke in their usual stile: his Grace said nothing, and Mr. Erskine, nothing but of himself: he was the little hero of his little tale, and swore, magnanimously swore, that as he had lived free, by God he would not die a slave.

Cedite, Romani Oratores, Cedite Graü.

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of the people, the supreme law, demand a temporary surrender of one part of our liberties, that the whole may not be lost for ever. Nor are we ignorant to whom we owe this diminution of our envied and valued privileges; we owe it to those to whom we have been already indebted for the repeated suspension of the Habeas Corpus Act, to the societies and their abettors.—The restless activity of the former causes every restriction which they affect to lament, and makes the loyal and well-affected the victims of their sedition and treason. The fraudulent encouragement of the latter flatters the people only to betray them, and tells them they have power that they may use it for the purposes of rebellion.

Resistance has been invited, but invited in vain; and when Mr. Fox executes his menace, you, as you once kindly promised us, may follow his example, and cease to

to be the * prattling representative of a dumb and enslaved people. Ah! Mr. Sheridan, if you would but keep this single promise, what praise and thanksgiving would be poured upon you from every part of an obliged and grateful nation! For, believe me, Sir, whatever concern the friends of Mr. Fox might feel for the loss of his splendid abilities, uniformly useless to himself, and, in one instance at least, portentous to the tranquility of the kingdom, your silence and secession would be hailed with a general joy, unallayed with the smallest portion of regret or regard, public or private, and attended only with a wish that you had retired at an earlier period, and a fervent and sincere prayer that you may never return again to curse the country with your services.

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A SUFFOLK FREEHOLDER.

31st January, 1796.

* See his speech of the 10th of November.

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